THE WRESTLING PRINCES

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Down the years I have visited many, many Chinese temples in my search for images of the deities and their legends. One near the coastal town of Muar in western Malaysia contained a pair of deities well known to me standing on the altar table before and below the main altar. The image consisted of a pair of conjoined deities - the Taibao Sheren 太保舍人, a Fujian local popular religion Daoist cult, involving a pair of youths, princes, so the story goes, who in image form are depicted standing together, legs apart, holding on to each other either with one arm around the other's shoulders or clutching a part of the other's anatomy, such as the knee, as if wrestling. In this instance the Taibao possibly means The Great Guardian, an old dynastic title for one of the most senior of the Chinese imperial advisers rather than the Great Protector which is the literal meaning. Sheren was a quasi-official title for "independent kinsmen" in other words "hangers on."

Individually the two youths bear the names of Kang 康 and Ruan 官, though they were identified in two temples in southern Malaysia simply, one the Sheren 舍人 as the Civil Protector, Wenbao 文保 and the other, the Taibao 太保 as the Military Protector, Wubao 武保. They are worshipped for general good fortune and have only been identified in small Chinese temples within Fujian communities in Singapore, Malaysia, southern Thailand and in two or three temples in Taipai and Kaohsiung counties in Taiwan. In this rural temple near Muar Kesang the main deity on the altar is a seated matron known as Liu Jia Zhenren 刘家真人 or Yuan Jian Zhenren 元堅真人, not seen anywhere else and said to be the mother of the two youths. Before and below her image are two sets of the youths, portraying them as wrestlers with leather shin-guards and wrist strengtheners, with one of the pair grasping the other firmly by the leg.

The two are believed by some to have been Indian princes brought to Fujian more than a thousand years ago and little more, apart from their surnames, would appear to be known at any of the temples in which these images have been seen. However, in one temple in Taiwan they were said to be the sons of a wealthy man. One son had shown great aptitude and had been sent to study in the capital, and was white
skinned, whilst the other had been put to work supervising the father's labourers in the fields and whose skin had been burned black. The elder was said to be depicted at thirteen years of age whilst the second was two years younger. Ruan, the younger prince, is portrayed with a fierce expression whilst the elder has a gentler look despite not having any eyebrows. Both tend to be depicted with white [pink] or black skin, and are barefoot. Both are dressed simply, in trousers and a small apron. They wear golden bracelets on their forearms and their head-dress consists of a gilded crown from which protrude long peacock's feathers.

A tiny matched seaside shrine at Port Dickson, also on the west coast of Malaysia, contains a small composite image of the youths, most certainly wrestling, one grasping the other by his queue and an arm.

In a temple in Singapore the keeper was adamant that the two youths only spoke Hindi and that many of the devotees in his temple praying before them were Singaporean Indians who regularly consulted the Hokkien [Fujian] spirit medium in the temple. In every day life the medium only spoke Hokkien and therefore had to work through a spirit interpreter. The Indian devotees, he added, could only understand their mother tongue, Tamil, one of the Dravidian languages of southern India and who seemed to be able to converse with the deities through the medium without any trouble 'as the medium in his trance spoke Tamil'.

In one temple in Fujian recently a local Chinese explained that they were homosexuals presumably a guess inspired by their pose. However, you can imagine our reaction when in a village temple in Kaohsiung county in southern Taiwan we saw what appeared to be the standard image of the pair, swathed as usual in silken robes donated by devotees, being "undressed" by the leering temple custodian to reveal that the dark skinned youth was holding the white skinned by the forearm and his queue whilst the white skinned youth had one arm around the shoulder of the black skinned one, but was holding the black skinned youth's penis with the other hand. The custodian fell about when he saw how disconcerted we were. The village elders left their card playing on the temple veranda to join in the general laughter which encouraged village children to rush in to see what was happening. They were chased out but not before several had managed to see the image and were unable to get out fast enough to tell the others what they had seen. The custodian explained that someone had ordered the image to be carved this way some years ago, possibly as a joke, and very few devotees
were aware of the detail as the silken robes were only very rarely removed. I had the temerity to ask whether they might be homosexuals and received the full blast of indignation. How could I even think of such a thing - they were deified humans, spirits [shen]. I then asked whether there were any other similarly carved images portraying the Princes thus - but this time I realised that I had outstayed my welcome. We never did find out whether any similar images are on Chinese altars elsewhere.
Tái-pao Shch-jen, Kaohsiung County, Taiwan, 2002